

“YOU WILL BE ARRESTED, PERSECUTED AND KILLED”: NIGERIAN REALITIES AND THE QUESTION OF ATTITUDE TO ORGANIZED PERSECUTION

Francis O. Falako

University of Lagos, Nigeria

Persecution is one of the perennial challenges in the annals of the Church. Viewed as part of the naughty issue of the suffering of the innocent or the problem of evil; the topic remains on the front burner no thanks to the global escalation in secularism, aggressive evangelism and unprecedented radicalism. The Church in Nigeria is perturbed as to what constitutes the most appropriate attitude to organized persecution despite Biblical predictions and avalanche of historical evidences. This paper investigates the varieties of responses particularly the 3Rs: Retreat, React and Retaliate. It attempts to answer the question: To what degree are Nigerian Christians to withdraw, defend themselves or retaliate in the face of fierce and annihilating opposition? The objectives are to analyze organized persecution in Nigerian; appraise the issues of attitude, and compare and contrast these with biblical and extra-biblical evidence. The author adopted a historical approach and drew data from books and newspapers. The paper will hopefully contribute to the history of Christianity in Nigeria as well as the avalanche of works on the implications of emerging global terrorism. In conclusion, the paper recommends that whichever attitude one takes; biblical dictates should override.

Keywords: Nigeria, Attitude to persecution, Organized persecution, Response, Reprisal.

Introduction

Persecution is one of the most recurrent global issues these days. Though experienced by adherents of various religions of the world in one form or the other; the church is today perhaps the most persecuted as it was in the Roman days. The persistent rise in religious radicalism and attempts toward global Islamization both bring the topic to the front burners. Thus, the heat of persecution becomes fierce by the day due to the multiplication of organized terrorist groups. According to the *Bad Urach Statement* (in Sauer & Howell (2010: 23),

Religious persecution is an unjust action against a believer or group of believers of a certain religion or worldview. This may be by systematic oppression, genocide, discrimination, annoyance, or other means... Religious persecution has religion (not ethnicity, gender, political persuasion, etc.) as its primary motivation, though other factors can be involved. Persecution of Christians is a form of religious persecution in which victims are targeted primarily because they are Christians.

Christians are daily harassed on account of their profession from Indonesia in the Asia Pacific, Colombia in Latin America, Turkey in the Middle East, India in South and Central Asia to Nigeria in Africa. This is

attested to by many agencies that attempt to measure persecution. An example is the World Watch List of Open Doors International which has been adjudged the oldest of the annual scoring instruments in use (Sauer, 2012). Another global watchdog, Voice of Martyrs' (VOM), in its 2017 report observed sixty eight (68) countries under three categories: Restricted (these are countries where Christians are harassed because of "government sanctioned circumstances" or anti-Christian laws. Persecution here takes the form of imprisonment, deprivation and killings); Hostile (these are nations where attempts are made for the protection of Christians and religious freedom, yet Christians are occasionally persecuted by family, friends and other groups); and Monitor (countries being monitored by VOM due to the tendency towards increased persecution (www.persecution.com)).

Also, another watchdog, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), rated Nigeria as the third most terrorized nation for the third year running (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/271514/global-terrorism-index/>). Next, to Iran and Afghanistan, Nigeria recorded a total of 1,832 deaths in 466 incidents ranking her the third among the five most impacted nations in 2016 (<http://globalterrorismindex.org/>). Two of the deadliest terrorist groups: *Boko Haram* and Fulani Herdsmen are blamed for the deaths. Since its birth in 2009, the Group of Al-Sunna for Preaching and Jihad, which is the English translation of *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (جماعة أهل السنة والجهاد لمدعوة ال), popularly called *Boko Haram*, has been unleashing terror on the land in an unprecedented manner (Falako, 2013). Also, Fulani Herdsmen of recent have been construed to be an underground attempt to complement the efforts of *Boko Haram* in the persecution of Christians in disguise.

Consequently, in 2014, the GTI listed the Herders as the fourth deadliest global terror group and the second-biggest threat after *Boko Haram* (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/271514/global-terrorism-index/>). Therefore, organized persecution is being experienced throughout the nation, particularly in the Northern part. The most annoying part is the seeming lack of will on the part of the government to end the killings. Not much is done beyond the rhetoric of condemnation, condolence visits and panels of inquiries. So, the question of an appropriate response is being taken up by not a few individuals and bodies (Sauer, 2013). For example, the watchdog, *Under Caesar's Sword*, underlined three of such responses:

First, strategies of survival, through which they aim to preserve the life and basic activities of their communities; second, strategies of association, through which they build ties with others that strengthen their resilience in the face of persecution; and third, strategies of confrontation, through which they openly challenge the persecution levied against them or live out their faith such that they accept the possibility of martyrdom as a mode of witness. These responses are not mutually exclusive (Under Caesar's Sword. 2017: 4).

To conflict resolution experts, there are "4 R's" in the development of anger; these are: Resolve, Resent, Reject, and Revenge. According to Edmiston (2001: 65), "if an issue is not resolved it turns into resentment, if the resentment is not dealt with it becomes rejection and the person starts to distance themselves in some way. If that fails, then the rejection turns outward and becomes revenge and the person retaliates". This theory is also reinforced by Newton's Third Law of Motion that "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction" (Edmiston, 2001:65). The natural tendency of man to balance forces operates in all spheres in a somewhat modified form. In the Nigerian context, unresolved anger breeds revenge or retaliation. This study, therefore, articulates Christian's response to organized persecution; precisely, it appraises the thorny issue of reprisal in the Nigerian context. The findings would enrich the history of Christianity in Nigeria as well as the avalanche of researches on the diversity of attitudes to the emerging global terrorism.

Nigerian Realities

One cannot deny the reality of the persecution of Christians in Nigeria since the 1960 Independence. Recent events have so much heightened the spate that the nation is rated one of the most dangerous places

to be a Christian (ODUSA.org/wwl). Some of these events are a global rise in radical or fanatical Islam; ravaging effects of deforestation that is pushing the Fulani herdsmen to the Southern part of the country; poor theological education; unbridled desire to assume political and economic control and aggressive evangelism (Sani, 2007; & Falako, 2012). The Civil War of 1967 to 1970 led to regional or ethnic consciousness which is being exacerbated by the seed of religious acrimonies (Ushe, 2015). The dichotomy is more noticeable in Northern Nigeria where religious affiliation determines everything: recruitment into the armed forces, employment, promotion and even admission into schools (Turaki, 1993). So, Ushe (2015) concluded that it is the daily expression of religiosity which widens the cracks in the relationship between people of different ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. Thus, ethnic clashes take on religious coloration and vice versa.

Many works have documented the religious and ethnic clashes in the country (Sani, 2007; Ray, 2012; Nuzhat, 2014). In particular, Sani (2007) gave a stunning analysis of religious violence perpetrated in Northern Nigeria between 1960 and 2007. However, the carnage documented by Sani is but a child's play compared to what the *Boko Haram* sect and the Fulani Herdsmen have carried out since 2009 (Falako, 2013).

In an assessment of the recent killings in Benue State, Iyorchia Ayu was down to earth when he noted that;

People are genuinely concerned, people are worried. Unfortunately, it is mixed with our own local Nigerian politics where there has always been this lack of trust based on its history from the jihad days of Othman Dan Fodio when the Caliphate was created in most part of the North. People are concerned with this mass migration from the Sahel region down South and the rather myopic policies of the federal government over the years, together with the history of the jihad, the policies of the Northern regional government including the 1965 law on grazing reserve and cattle routes which were clearly in favour of the cattle breeders are creating a lot of political tension in Nigeria (Nwosu, 2018).

Not a few have observed that the ravaging herdsmen are not from neighboring countries as claimed by President Muhammadu Buhari. This writer thinks that the activities of the herdsmen betray them as the metamorphoses of the declining and decimated *Boko Haramites*. Masquerading as herders, the attackers pillage and occupy Christian villages. It is against this background that Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the new leader of *Boko Haram*, vowed in 2016 not to attack Muslims like his predecessor, Abubakar Shekau. He proposed to concentrate on attacking churches and Christians (Oladimeji, 2016). The non-release of Miss Leah Sharibu along with other kidnapped Dapchi girls seems to be in line with this master plan.

The Question of Attitude

Debates on what should be the ideal approach to persecution and the persecutors are being echoed in these days of fierce opposition (Sauer, 2013). The experience of Jesus Christ and events from the apostolic era till date show varieties of responses; though persecution is a constant and nagging decimal in each age. Attempts to glean from the teachings and actions of Christ reveal a depth of reactions. Falako (2017) observed that a firm grasp of the socio-political scenario of the era; prayer; forgiveness; tact; security consciousness and non-violence characterized Christ's outlook. These reactions of Jesus displayed a profound understanding of the will of God for His life and mission. For example, he tactically withdrew to another region when told that John the Baptist was beheaded (Matt. 14: 10-13).

Equally insightful is the stance of the early Church, particularly the approach of Apostle Paul. Once a persecutor himself, his letters tell so much about organized persecution and how to stand in the face of opposition. To the Church in Rome, he wrote: *We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance* (Rom. 5: 3). Therefore, Paul admonished the Roman Christians not only to endure persecution but to rejoice therein as such tribulation is one of the blessings of salvation. According to Stamps (2011), *tribulations* refer to all kinds of troubles and difficulties that may afflict someone. Bowen

(1996) identified three ways of facing suffering: complain; *stoical* endurance; and rejoicing in endurance; he also listed endurance (*constancy*); character (*provedness*); and hope (*confidence*) as fruits of suffering. This stand seems to be the general posture in the apostolic days.

One persecution that has significance and relevance to the issue of attitude was that under Emperor Decius who led the first *universal* persecution of the Church (Oshitelu, 2002). In 250AD, Decius issued an edict requiring all citizens to engage in Emperor-worship and obtain a certificate (*libellus*) proving they had done so. According to Frened (1966), forty-four of these *libelli* survived. The reactions varied; those who defied the edict and refused to buy a certificate were arrested or executed. Then, one could obtain one without actually sacrificing by bribing Roman officials. Among those arrested and killed were Cyprian of Carthage, the Bishops of Jerusalem, Antioch and Stephen and Sixtus 11 of Rome (Renwick & Harman, 1999). Some bought the certificate while others like the Bishop of Smyrna performed the sacrifice (Oshitelu, 2002). The diverse reactions created what has been termed "a crisis of conscience" for many and caused a lot of tension in the Church (Falk, 1997). Hence, the persecution had lasting repercussions. There were two reactions: while some Churches welcomed those accused of apostasy back into the fold, others refused. There were strong arguments between St. Augustine and the Donatists over the issues of welcoming the *traditors* (those who recanted Christianity, the lapsed or traitors) (Oshitelu, 2002). In his fierce dispute during the Donatist controversy, Augustine used the phrase *Extra ecclesium nulla salutis* (Outside the church, there is no salvation). This statement played a significant role in the history of the church, particularly in the middle ages and the Reformation (Nichols, 2006). Unfortunately, the Donatists eventually seceded from the Catholic Church because they had embraced the apostasy or the lapsed (Renwick & Harman, 1999).

Martyrdom and Apologetics are the two other Christian responses. That many extolled and glorified in martyrdom could be deciphered from statements credited to the early Church. Justin Martyr was quoted to have said that: *Though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but, the more such things happen, the more do others in larger numbers become faithful* (Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, 110). Other works included Origen's *Exhortatio Martyrium* (In Praise of Martyrdom) written in 235AD; and Cyprian's *In Praise or Exhortation of Martyrdom* (Oshitelu, 2002). These and the much-popularized epistle on the martyrdom of Polycarp of Symna gave insight into the attitude to persecution in the early church. The prime idea then was that "to be a true disciple of Christ, one must follow Christ to the point of death" (Nichols, 2006: 59). Thus, Augustine talked of "the mania for self-destruction" in the early Church (Ide & Smith, 1985).

Many Christians chose death instead of recanting the faith; those who did so came to be called martyrs; which means "witnesses." This attitude is known as "Seeking or Glorifying Martyrdom." To Boer (1976), it brought much suffering upon the Church then as many misconceived it as a quick means of "attaining to the presence of Christ." For example, Ignatius of Antioch (110-117) begged the Romans in his "to do nothing that will prevent him from being thrown to the lions when he reached Rome" (Boer, 1976). To the consternation of the persecutors; the glorification of martyrdom had unexpected effects on the populace as many were drawn to Christianity. Tertullian was converted to Christianity based in part on his wonder at Christians' faithfulness in the face of martyrdom. He later declared, that "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" (Schaff, 1997); and that "Martyrdom is required by God" (Ide & Smith, 1985).

The third response of the early church to persecution in the Roman Empire was to write apologies, or defenses, of the Christian faith. Those who put pen to paper were the bishops and influential Christians; better known in Ecclesiastical Studies as the *Apologists*. Their purpose was to stop the persecution and defend Christianity against accusations and misconceptions. Thus, they addressed their works to the Roman Emperors, the Senate, Governors, notable individuals and the general public (Boer, 1976). For example, they explained that the Christian's "love feast" did not involve cannibalism, or orgies, as accused, but was a sacred meal in honor of Christ's death (Boer, 1976).

A comparative analysis of persecution in the early church and present realities in Nigeria shows a lot of similarities and dissimilarities. On the question of attitude, a lot of debates are ongoing. Considered below are some of the mind-sets. One, some preach endurance, patience, prayerfulness, watchfulness,

perseverance, witnessing and expectancy of the *Parousia*. They allude to Jesus' suffering and His warnings in passages like Matthew 5:10: 12; 10: 16, 26-27; I Pet 4:12: 14a Rev 7:14-15. Two, Campaigns and Demonstrations: for the first time in the history of the country, Christians under the auspices of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) have taken to protests against organized persecution which is a step further the prayer sessions; apologetic letters; visitations to government officials and the affected areas; and the donation of relief materials. For the first time, there were nation-wide demonstrations under the auspices of CAN on Sunday, 29th April 2018 (Ezeh, 2018; Graham, 2018).

Three, Relocation (retreat), Reaction (reply, retort) or Retaliation (reprisal, revenge) is the third standpoint. Perhaps, most Nigerian Christians, especially those in the Middle Belt states of Benue, Taraba, Plateau, Kogi, and Nassarawa, are bothered on whether to retreat, defend themselves or retaliate. Recent onslaughts of *Boko Haram* have led to the relocation of many Southerners (mostly Christians) to the South. For the Northern Christians, the Internally Displaced Persons' Camps (IDPs) have become a haven. The camps stink due to mismanagement, sporadic and coordinated attacks, and suicide bombings. In March 2018, the IDP camp at Rann, Kala-Balge, Borno State, was attacked by *Boko Haram*. Many soldiers and three United Nations aid workers were killed.

Following the 2000 *Shariah* riots in the North, then Governor Chief Orji Kalu of Abia State was quoted to have said that "The Igbo would in future retaliate against any group in the country that engages in acts of pogrom against the Igbo." He vowed that he would no longer prevent reprisal attacks. Thus, there were reprisals in the State with high casualty (Falako, 2014). Also, the sight of hapless victims from the Maiduguri crises of 2006 resulted in counter attacks on Northern Muslims and Mosques in the South (Obafemi, 2006; Ushe, 2015). Below, is a self-drawn table showing instances of reprisal attacks in different parts of the nation. The analysis shows that reprisal attacks are on the increase from the year 2000.

S/N	Date	Place	Occasion
1.	2000	Abia State.	<i>Sharia</i> riot in Kaduna
2.	5/1/2000	Oyo Town, Oyo State	Reprisal violence on Hausa/Fulani Muslims. It came as a result of an attack on Christians
3.	28/2/2000	Aba/Umuahia, Abia State	Reprisal violence as a result of an earlier attack on Christians in the North.
4.	17/10/2000	Alaba, Lagos State	Spill over of Hausa/Fulani Muslim versus Yoruba Christians clashes.
5.	Feb. 2006	Onitsha, Anambra State	Maiduguri crisis
6.	24/10/2010	Jos, Plateau state.	<i>Boko Haram</i> attacks on Churches led to clashes between Muslims and Christians.
7.	26/2/2012	Jos, Plateau state.	After a <i>Boko Haram</i> suicide bomber had crashed into a Church in Jos, Christian youths beat two Muslims to death in revenge.
8.	11/3/2012	Jos, Plateau state.	After a suicide bomber had killed 3 in an attack on a Roman Catholic Church, Christian youths in a reprisal attack.
9.	10/6/2012	Biu, Borno State	Gunmen attacked a Church service in Biu; unidentified persons attacked bystanders in retaliation.
10.	10/6/2012	Jos, Plateau State.	A suicide bomber crashed into the Christ Chosen Church, Jos; bystanders were attacked in retaliation.
11.	20/11/2017	Kikang, Adamawa State	Reprisal attacks on a Fulani community that left about 73 persons dead.
12.	22/01/2018	Volpi, Adamawa State	Reprisal attacks by suspected Bachama militant youths; they burnt houses and killed two children.

Source: Self Drawn, 2018.

Calls for self-defense are signals of the apparent failure of the government to secure lives and properties. Rhetoric after each attack or killing ends with the submission of reports by panels of inquiries; nothing tangible is done to prevent future occurrences (Emewu, 2011). Thus, the calls for self-defense is getting louder by the day; considering the cases of connivance by the nation's security forces as alleged by General Danjuma. The call for self-defense make the fourth of the attitudes. This standpoint was first echoed in 2009 by the then national chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor. Following the incessant attacks by *Boko Haram* elements in the North, Oritsejafor called on Christians to defend themselves against their attackers (Falako, 2014).

Also, Southeast Christian leaders threatened reprisals and outright war should *Boko Haram* continue with the killings of Christians. One of the leaders, Bishop Chukwuma, was quoted to have threatened that;

Christian leaders will have no other option than to begin retaliation on their mosques and emir palaces. For me as the Southeast CAN chairman, I'm ready to lead people with Ogbunigwe (the Biafran bomb used during the civil war); this Ogbunigwe will be more severe than the Boko Haram bombs... we shall begin retaliation, and that will be the beginning of another civil war in Nigeria (Nnadi, 2012).

In the year 2018, the former Chief of Army Staff and Minister of Defense, Lt. Gen. T. Y. Danjuma (Rtd.) called for self-defense. The retired Army General also indicted the security forces and sternly warned his people in Taraba State that *Our Armed Forces are not neutral. If you are depending on the Armed forces to stop the killings, you will all die, one by one* (<http://punchng.com/understanding-danjumas-call-for-self-defence/>). The daily massacres in the North Central States of Benue, Plateau, Taraba, and Nasarawa is the premise of the call for self-defense. Instances of flagrant abandonment and betrayal by security forces in the face of impending attacks were at Berom (Plateau State) in 2012; Nimbo (Enugu State) in 2016; and Zamfara in 2018. In each case, security agents ignored intelligence reports of impending attacks. The rampaging herdsmen destroyed over 500 churches in Benue State alone (www.naija.ng/1157434-can-blows-hot-number-churches-destroyed-benue-state-blames-herdsmen.htm). The Government responded by saying that self-defense should be *within the ambit of the constitution. There is absolutely nothing wrong with you defending yourself in line with the law. The security services in the country will probably not be telling Nigerians to do nothing when they come and attack* (Jannah, 2018).

Section 32 (3) of the nation's Constitution stipulated the right of self-defense. Self-defense or private defense, though an age long rule, has not been given a statutory definition in Nigeria (Filani, 2014). Russell (in Filani, 2014:164) clarified that;

A man is justified in resisting by force anyone who manifestly intends and endeavors by violence or surprise to commit a known felony against either his person, habitation or property. In these cases, he is not obliged to retreat, and may not merely resist the attack where he stands but may indeed pursue his adversary until the danger is ended and if in a conflict between them he happens to kill his attacker such killing is justifiable.

Contrariwise, many think that taking up arms in self-defense and reprisal attacks is unchristian as it raises a lot of issues: moral, theological, legal, etc. The crusades of old are unwholesome pages in the history of Christianity. To Escobar (2003), rather than repeating them, many Christians are looking elsewhere for justice. Unfortunately, justice, equity and fair play elude us in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Persecution of Christians in Nigeria is one of the fallouts of the growing global fundamentalism. Beyond the rhetoric of condemnation, condolence visits and panels of inquiries; the Nigerian government should bring the blatant perpetrators of organized persecution to book and ensure the security of all. The inability

to do these is exacerbating the anger that is driving people to revenge. Self-defense is constitutional, yet it is against the anti-violent nature of Christ. As the debate rages on, it is better to caution that whichever stance one considers, biblical mandates should override.

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